

#BehindtheSelfie with... Alan Bell

By [Leigh Andrews](#)

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This week, we find out what's really going on behind the selfie with technophile Alan Bell, in his new role as partner and managing director at M&C Saatchi Abel Johannesburg.



A little stretch of paradise on Bell's doorstep.

1. Where do you live, work and play?

Bell: I live in Durban and work in Joburg. Play is for children... just kidding! I'm a family man, so love taking the kids to the beach or the bush. The weekly commute means I have the best of both worlds, though my wife is the real hero as she definitely has the harder job. Being new to Joburg, I'm excited about exploring the restaurants and secret spots, and I'm a big fan of microbreweries.

2. What's your claim to fame?

Bell: Isn't coming from Durban enough? Actually, I grew up in 'Maritzburg so decided fairly early on that I wanted to explore the world. By the age of 26 I had travelled to more than 50 countries, backpacking and doing odd jobs to get by. Highlights include trekking in Nepal, diving in Indonesia and sailing across the Atlantic.

3. Describe your career so far.

Bell: I got into advertising relatively late, after a brief stint at Unilever, then my epic voyage around the world. I was incredibly fortunate to start out at Ogilvy Cape Town, rising through the ranks of account management. It was here that I met Mike Abel, who soon became my boss and mentor.

Six years later, the warm Indian Ocean and an opportunity to open a new agency delivered me back on the shores of Durban. After clearing out an old storeroom behind the office on Berea Road, OgilvyAction was born. This was to become our entry point into the world of brand activation, and we soon built an impressive client list and did some pretty cool work. But the downside of being a small part of a big group is that you're usually on the outside looking in. So, when Dale Tomlinson asked me to join The Hardy Boys, I was open to the move.

The benefits of being part of an independent agency are obvious: the space to make our own decisions, even if the commercial payback sometimes takes a little longer, and the freedom to collaborate with whomever can provide the best solutions for our clients. The marketing communications industry is evolving at breakneck speed, and at THB our business was constantly changing shape as we developed and acquired new skills in design, digital, experiential, shopper engagement, content production and PR. But eventually the time came to take a break, re-assess my role in the industry and explore new opportunities. Bookended by two family holidays in the Kruger, I enjoyed a three-month sabbatical at the end of 2016.

In between cultivating Durban North's finest organic vegetable garden, fixing up an old wooden sailing boat and collecting the kids from school, I had a conversation with Mike about a few ideas I had for starting a new model of creative consultancy. It seems I wasn't that original in my thinking as much of what I proposed Mike was already implementing at M&S Saatchi Abel, and within 20 minutes we were discussing the possibility of my joining the group. The rest, I guess, will one day be history. But until then, it's #firstdayoftherestofmylife.

4. Tell us a few of your favourite things.

Bell: Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens.

5. What do you love about your industry?

Bell: I love that I am constantly inspired by brilliant people applying the art of creativity to the logic of business.

6. Describe your average workday, if such a thing exists.

Bell: A few weeks into the new job, there's certainly nothing average about my workday. I'm usually in the office pretty early so try to get any admin done before the madness begins. And thereafter it's conversations: with clients, with staff, with people. My job is all about helping people perform at their best, and unblocking anything that slows them down. I've often said that if you can find me behind my desk I'm probably not working (at least, not doing anything of real value). So I actually love the fact that I spend my days in meetings, because that's where the conversations happen.

7. What are the tools of your trade?

Bell:

- My iPhone – I'm constantly in touch with my team via WhatsApp and iMessage. And the ability to scan emails during

even the shortest break means I'm hopefully not creating any bottlenecks.

- The Gautrain – I fly up from Durban on Monday mornings and walk into the office at 8:15. I think I have a better commute than most people who live in Joburg.
- Uber – whether I'm attending meetings in Durban, Cape Town, Joburg, London, Dubai or Nairobi, Uber means I never have to wait for lifts or deal with traffic.

8. Who is getting it right in your industry?

Bell:

- [M&C Saatchi Abel](#), obviously. I think the partner model works and solves one of the biggest issues we have in our industry, which is client access to senior people. I also believe that the agency's positioning "Brutal simplicity of thought" is right in a world of clutter and alternative truth.
- [Avatar](#) – they seem to have cracked the code, enabling them to offer clients big agency thinking while simultaneously leading the charge of transformation. Am looking forward to watching their journey.
- **Native VML** – just when everyone thought the race for the centre had been won by the big traditional agencies, these guys are proving that digital agencies can also come up with big ideas which are on brand.
- [Joe Public](#) – I love that they have got huge and retained their independence. The founders are still in charge, and they're doing great work.
- **ConversationLab** – these guys in Durban are seriously punching above their weight and are growing rapidly. Watch this space.
- **Ogilvy** – always good, [incredibly so](#).

9. List a few pain points the industry can improve on.

Bell: Costs, turnaround times, access to the brightest people, ridiculous egos.

10. What are you working on right now?

Bell: Learning about the people in our business. Making sure the structures are right and that everyone has what they need to be brilliant.

11. Tell us some of the buzzwords floating around in your industry at the moment, and some of the catchphrases you utter yourself.

Bell: Digital – please can we kill that word. It gives too many people a place to hide. I've never heard a consumer say: "I'm going to check my digital touchpoints to find a new dress for this weekend's party".

12. Where and when do you have your best ideas?

Bell: In the moment, when I'm under pressure to solve a problem.

13. What would we find if we scrolled through your phone?

Bell: Hundreds of contacts, loads of apps, a bunch of pics, and some stuff you shouldn't see.

14. What advice would you give to newbies hoping to crack into the industry?

Bell: Get a decent qualification, fall in love with brands, expand your mind. And get over yourself. We sell stuff, we don't save lives.

Simple as that. [Click here](#) for more on M&C Saatchi Abel, email Bell at alan.bell@mcsaatchiabel.co.za and be sure to [follow](#)

[him](#) and [M&C Saatchi Abel](#) on Twitter.

**Interviewed by [Leigh Andrews](#).*

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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